



Communication with Techies (When You Aren't One)

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It is usually unwise to strongly stereotype a group of constituents. However, when it comes to training or coaching technical people ("techies"), a few considerations do commonly apply.

Techies operate by a different set of standards than the rest of the workforce; they have different priorities and are motivated by different factors. Most of these differences relate to the way techies think about the world and the demands of their work.

To a techie, money, although important, is less of a motivator than having something interesting to do. Money and stock options may be good for *keeping score*, but challenging work and intellectual prestige rank much higher as top incentives.

Techies live in a very uncertain world, a world of problems and solutions, where ambiguity and creativity reign supreme. Techies can rarely provide concrete answers (as to time, cost, or result) because the problems they tackle are very often unclear from the start. These problems have a tendency to grow in scope as each layer of complexity, or unknown factor, is identified and evaluated. In short, solutions to most of these problems are not found, they *evolve*.

Techies relish the acquisition and sharing of knowledge. The path to discovery is often more important than solving the problem itself. That is, a technique and the elegance of its design and/or implementation are of more interest than the application of that technique.

As a manager, trainer or facilitator, you must be ever vigilant about keeping a techie "on track" and focused on *solving* the problem at hand. Help them recognize and accept the difference between an aesthetically pleasing solution and one that is "good enough" (from a business perspective). Help them learn to view and describe their work from other perspectives, especially those of their clients and support organizations.

With techies, avoid using faulty logic or vague feelings as reasons for decisions, or as motivators. It won't work. Stick to the facts. Appeal to their curiosity, or to their sense of right and wrong, and don't violate their trust (you won't get it back easily).

Contrarily, techies can be sloppy about the differences between facts, assumptions, and opinions in justifying their work. Regardless of their technical prowess or intellect, watch out for statements that substitute opinions or assumptions for facts.

Other key concepts that are important to techies include fun, creativity, freedom, self-determination, and integrity. Techies are rebels by nature. Spouting dogma and "accepted thinking" to a techie will only challenge them to prove you wrong (in the name of progress, of course)!

Techies survive in their environment through demonstrated competence, quick thinking, and deep knowledge. They can be quick to judge and harsh in their assessments. Be prepared to demonstrate your

competence, lest you be labeled a "Bozo." Techies protect themselves and their work from the influence of *Bozos*.

Finally, accept that techies are more loyal to their technology than to their company. Remember their work is their art. Where they may accept criticism of their company with equanimity, they take criticism of their art very personally.

About the Author: Yvonne T. Ryan, *The Techie Leadership Coach* and founder of Leader's Edge CA, provides practical coaching and education to technical professionals seeking to improve their leadership skills and advance their career through innovative programs like "Techies on the RiseTM." Her particular focus is on middle management and team leadership." Visit her Web site at: www.leadersedgeca.com.

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